

Research Article

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Geography, Military Balance, and the Defence of NATO's Borderlands

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Abstract: The enlargement of NATO and the defence of its borders have occupied an important place in the security debate in the last few years. This study discusses the situation of the NATO members and candidate states which are most directly exposed to Russian military power. After analysing the cases of the three Baltic republics, Norway, Georgia, and Ukraine, I conclude with a paradox; although NATO is on the aggregate level stronger, it cannot hope to guarantee the security of its eastern borderlands. This reality could push these states to bandwagon with Russia.

Keywords: strategic studies; military balance; NATO-Russian relations.

1 Introduction

The enlargement of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) has been replaced at the centre of the European security debate since the Ukrainian events of 2014 (Kroenig 2015). Some have argued that NATO expansion should be halted, notably because it may antagonise Russia beyond the point of no return. Others favour more enlargement on the basis that membership deters Russia from aggressive moves and promotes traditional Western values.¹

Moving beyond political and diplomatic arguments, this study discusses the existing fundamental situation on the ground with the aim of opening up the NATO enlargement debate. It shows that four NATO member states – Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and Norway – and two putative future member states – Georgia and Ukraine – are in a worrisome military situation in regards to Russia. Norway is one of the founding members of NATO in 1949. Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania joined the Alliance during the 2004 wave of enlargement. Georgia and Ukraine, after the Rose Revolution in 2003 and the Orange Revolution in 2004, respectively, have stated their intention to become NATO members. After NATO's 2008 Bucharest summit, the Alliance made clear that Georgia and Ukraine were bound to join it at some point in the future (Brunnstrom and Cornwell 2008). All these states are now caught in the middle of a wider NATO-Russia power competition (Hooker 2019, pp. 2–9; King 2008; Mearsheimer 2014; Wilhelmsen and Gjerde 2018).

Each case is approached through a short military and geographic analysis. Putting all of those states, some NATO members and some not, together is pertinent. The security issues they face come from two variables often used in the field of strategic studies. These variables are hostile geographic location and unfavourable balance of military power (Loo 2003). In broader terms, this study locates itself within the realist paradigm, which assumes that material capabilities often explain policy outcomes (Mearsheimer 2001, chs. 2–4; Waltz 1979, chs. 6–8). Walt (2013, pp. 28–33) has shown that alliance decisions tend to be conditioned by the military balance. States generally balance against threats. However, when a state is not capable to balance or defend itself by its own means – internal balancing, and is unlikely to be successfully defended by a foreign ally – external balancing, it will be forced to bandwagon with the threatening power in order to escape destruction. Indeed, NATO is currently unable to protect some of its members and would be unable to defend some of the countries that would like to become members. That is a paradoxical situation

¹ This debate has been well introduced by German (2017) and Marten (2017).

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considering that NATO is at the aggregate level more powerful than Russia. This paradox and its policy implications – the risk of member or candidate states bandwagoning with Russia – are discussed in the last two parts of this article.

2 The Baltic States and NATO's Dilemma

Shlapak and Johnson (2016) argue that Russia has the capability to occupy the three Baltic states within 60 hours. NATO's force posture is ill-suited to resist a Russian invasion of the Baltic states (Boston et al. 2018). Collectively, Estonian, Latvian, and Lithuanian active forces muster approximately 34,000 men and three tanks (IISS 2020, pp. 100–101, 122–125). Before its August 2008 war against Russia, Georgia had 32,000 men and 129 tanks. Its military found itself completely crushed after five days of conflict (Motin 2018, pp. 14, 20–22). It is arguable that Baltic states' troops are more competent than Georgian soldiers of 2008 and that their equipment is more modern. Although this is probably true, the Russian military is also far more powerful than it was in 2008. The Baltic republics are largely outgunned by the Russian Airborne Forces alone (IISS 2020, p. 202). The few hundred soldiers from other NATO countries present on their territory do not change the balance much and serve foremost as a tripwire force for deterrence purpose.²

The geographical location of the three Baltic states places them in a rather precarious situation. If the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad cannot be occupied or neutralised quickly by NATO before or at the very beginning of a Russian invasion, there is little chance for the Baltic states to avoid a swift defeat and occupation. Almost all of the Baltic states' exterior borders are potential flanks. The three countries form in fact a large NATO salient surrounded by Russian or Russia-dominated regions: the Russian homeland itself, Kaliningrad, Belarus, and the Eastern Baltic Sea. This is especially problematic for Vilnius, which is well within range of multiple rocket launchers and long-range artillery firing from the Belarusian border. There are no natural barriers protecting Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania from Russian troops; the region is just flat terrain. The Baltic republics are only connected to the rest of NATO by two narrow highways and one railway line going through the 65 kilometre-wide Suwalki Corridor, sandwiched between Belarus and Kaliningrad. Russia is strategically positioned to block and take control of this corridor early on in any conflict (Hodges et al. 2018). NATO will have to move to Kaliningrad very fast if it is to push the frontline back to Lithuania or Latvia. Estonia is lost in any scenario. Geographic disposition is therefore of no help to compensate against an unfavourable military situation.

There is little that can be done short of a politically unrealistic large military build-up in the region. The bottom line of the Baltic states' strategy consists of raising light paramilitary units and preparing for guerrilla warfare (Andžāns and Veebel 2017; Flanagan et al. 2019). Although this could inflict significant costs on the occupying forces in the long run, it will not save the Baltic republics from the 'shock and awe' of fire and manoeuvre that would be imposed by the Russians. They could alternatively attempt to copy the Israeli model; a very high level of military spending that allows maintaining powerful heavy units and based on a very quickly available and competent reserve force. However, the economic price of this would be enormous. As Andžāns and Veebel (2017, p. 36) put it:

given the significant Russian efforts in modernizing its armed forces, air and land forces in particular, since the Russo-Georgian War, and the almost non-existent air and naval forces of both Latvia and Estonia, it would be difficult to expect a formidable resistance from national capabilities alone (both have no attack aircraft or long-range air defence systems, their naval capabilities are limited to minesweepers and patrol boats). Therefore, [...] defence of both countries would almost entirely depend on allied capabilities, the U.S. in particular.

In spite of this, NATO has little incentive to pour troops into the area. The Baltic states cannot be the main operating base for NATO forces on the Eastern Flank. Indeed, all units engaged in the Baltic countries can end up trapped in a Baltic pocket, surrounded, and destroyed. Poland has to be the main foothold for Allied reinforcement coming to the region. NATO's conventional options for defending the Baltic countries are mostly down to two: holding the line in Poland and preparing for a counteroffensive or adopting an offensive posture and conquering Kaliningrad – and preferably western Belarus too – soon enough. Nevertheless, due to the difficulty of convincing popular opinion and the low likelihood that most Allied states would agree on such a posture, it is unlikely that an offensive strategy will be adopted any time soon. Besides, there is a growing sense in Warsaw that the military balance has shifted to such an extent that Poland itself could be the target of a Russian offensive (Poland. Ministry of National Defence 2018, pp.

² The question of deterrence is discussed at more length by Veebel (2018).

10–11). Poland will consequently receive a growing attention by NATO planners, at the detriment of the Baltic countries. For all these reasons, it is clear that no ideal solution for the defence of the Eastern Flank exists right now.

3 Norway, the Forgotten Flank

The 2014 events in Ukraine coupled with the regeneration of the Russian military unfolding since the late 2000s have made Norway wary of its powerful neighbour (Fouche and Solsvik 2018). Russia's interest in Norway is principally derived from the Kola Peninsula, headquarter of its Northern Fleet. Kola is one of Russia's few ice-free accesses to the open sea. It accommodates most of Moscow's nuclear-powered ballistic missile submarines. The Russians have an existential interest in protecting them and ensuring their safe passage towards the Arctic Ocean. In addition, the Northern Fleet's attack submarines can also be used for attacking NATO's sea lines of communication in the Atlantic (Allport 2018, p. 52; Frühling and Lasconjarias 2016, p. 111). After occupying the Norwegian border region of Finnmark, Russian air defence systems can be installed there to extend westward the air defence cover of Moscow's strategic assets in Kola and deny NATO access to the area (Friis 2018, p. 131).³

Oslo has little means to protect its north-eastern border. Norway has around five million people. Its main ground assets are a light armoured brigade and thirty-six tanks (IISS 2020, p. 132). This is grossly insufficient to offer a credible defence for Finnmark. While Norway is best described as an elongated range of mountains bordering the sea, Finnmark is relatively flat. This kind of terrain plays into the hands of the Russian army, which is well-structured for heavy armoured warfare. Logistics too favours Russia, which enjoys closer support bases. In straight line, the Norwegian border town of Kirkenes is 430 kilometres away from Tromsø and 1,400 kilometres away from Oslo, whereas it is only 145 kilometres away from Murmansk. From Kirkenes, the Russians can advance unhindered along the E6 highway to reach Lakselv, a small town with an airfield, and settle on what to do next. At this stage, Norway has to make sure that they cannot progress any further westward. It means fortifying themselves in the area of Tromsø and Bardufoss, where they would enjoy shorter lines of supply and a more mountainous terrain to slow Russian armour. Nevertheless, at this point, a large part of Finnmark would be under Moscow's control.

It is highly doubtful that NATO can react in time to prevent such a *fait accompli*. Britain and the United States maintain a few hundred troops in Norway on a rotational basis. Prepositioned stocks of equipment near Trondheim in central Norway also enable the United States to raise a Marine Expeditionary Unit and an artillery battalion on short notice (Great Britain. Ministry of Defence 2018; IISS 2020, p. 133). However, according to Allport (2018, p. 48), flying the men in, activating these mothballed units, and moving them to the frontline would take at least nine days. That would come far too late to retain Finnmark. Sending reinforcements through the sea would be slower still. Moreover, transport ships approaching Norway would be at risk of being ambushed by Russian attack submarines. Indeed, a transport ship can carry as much as one third of the equipment of a U.S. armoured brigade combat team. The impact on the military balance of having such a ship at the bottom of the sea would be disastrous (Allport 2018, p. 54). This threat will slow down still more the arrival of reinforcements to Norway. NATO and Norway's only options are then to choose between a counterattack for retaking Finnmark or accepting the loss of the region. This is fundamentally the same dilemma as the Baltic states but on a smaller scale.

4 Georgia: A Bridge Too Far?

Georgia's population is nearly four million people. It is sandwiched between Russia and Turkey. The separatist proto-states of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, aligned with Russia, control large chunks of its territory. The pro-Western government which emerged from the 2003 Rose Revolution stated its willingness to make Georgia a NATO member.

³ The Russians probably remember that during the Second World War, the Germans used Finland and Norway as staging areas for entering the Kola region. Beyond Finnmark, the Norwegian island of Jan Mayen and the Svalbard archipelago are also under the threat of a quick takeover by Russia (Kernan 1989, p. 29; Wither 2018). Due to an administrative reform, Finnmark County has merged with the neighbouring county of Troms on 1 January 2020. For convenience, this study keeps referring to the territory of this former county as Finnmark.

Growing tensions led to a war between Georgia and Russia in August 2008. Georgia was forced to acknowledge defeat after five days of conflict. It can count only on a handful of light units and its air force is almost inexistent (IISS 2020, p. 189).

It could appear at first that geography offers defensive advantages to Georgia. The Greater Caucasus mountain range makes the border with Russia while the Lesser Caucasus range makes the southern border. The demographic and economic core of Georgia, centred on the capital Tbilisi, is caught in between. This core does not represent a large tract of land and offers no strategic depth. The Greater Caucasus is a formidable natural barrier for any army coming from the North towards the Georgian heartland. Or at least it would be if it was under the control of the Georgian government. Due to its de facto domination over South Ossetia and the Roki Tunnel, the main road going south, Russia possesses an unhindered access to central Georgia.⁴ The demarcation line with South Ossetia is only a few dozen kilometres away from Tbilisi. It is so, like Vilnius, within rocket artillery fire range. Moreover, the Russians also hold the coastal road, namely the S1 highway. The part of this road going from the border to Sukhumi in Abkhazia is built on a thin strip of land sandwiched between the mountain and the sea. A relentless defence at this chokepoint would be a serious stumbling block to Russia. Nevertheless, as this major southward access too has been seized by Russia and its proxies, it does not help Georgia much (Motin 2018, p. 16).

The survival of the Georgian state in the face of an offensive is then dependent on the rapid arrival of reinforcements. Its only terrestrial link to NATO is Turkey. Since Georgia cannot trade space for time, NATO would have to mount a swift response within a few hours. This is only possible with a strong commitment from Turkey. The Black Sea is dominated by the Russian Navy, supported by powerful anti-ship batteries (IISS 2020, pp. 200, 205). This supremacy has been consolidated by the annexation of Crimea. Reinforcement by the sea is thus a nonstarter. During the 2008 war, Russia swiftly crippled the Georgian navy and blockaded Georgian ports. In addition, the proximity of Georgia's heartland to South Ossetia and Russia itself means that the Russians possess virtual air superiority over all of the country. Russian air defences and fighters are consequently able to block reinforcements from the air too. Turkey has a large and well-equipped military (IISS 2020, pp. 153–156). However, the Turkish army is poorly prepared to respond quickly to a contingency on its north-eastern border, as it is now focused on the civil war in Syria. Animosity between Turkey and other NATO countries also poses a new political liability for Georgia. Significant wartime reinforcement from NATO is therefore unlikely to save Georgia from defeat.

To sum up, the Georgians now find themselves with Russian troops a few kilometres away from their capital city, no sizable forces to stop them, and no ally to come for help. There is simply no way Georgia can resist a sustained Russian attack. To correct this inferiority, Georgia would need to launch a massive military build-up relatively to its size and wealth. It does not look like the Georgian leadership has retained this option. It would then seem that joining NATO is the only workable option. But NATO membership would not change the balance of power by itself. For holding against an attack long enough for the reinforcements to arrive, NATO would need to station a force equivalent to a division in the country or very close to it in north-eastern Turkey. Harmony between Turkey and the rest of the Alliance is thus the prerequisite for any realistic defence effort of Georgia.

5 Ukraine and the Curse of Geography

Relations between Russia and Ukraine became hostile after the 2014 revolution in Kyiv. Russia has annexed Crimea and supported the two separatist proto-states of the Donbas against Ukrainian loyalist forces. Due to these territorial losses and demographic decline, the Ukrainian population is now reduced to close to thirty-seven million (Datskevych 2020). The core of Ukraine's ground forces consists of three armoured brigades, eleven mechanised brigades, and five light brigades supported by sizable naval infantry and airborne units (IISS 2020, pp. 211–213).

Military factors and geographic realities conspire against Ukraine. Ukraine has increased both the number and the quality of its troops since 2014. However, it is doubtful that Ukrainian units are as mobile and possess as much organic firepower as Russian units. The Ukrainian case enables the exact type of warfare that Russia likes the most

⁴ During the 2008 conflict, the Georgian army attempted to take back control of the Roki Tunnel. Had they succeeded, the Russians would have had a less easy victory (Motin 2018, p. 20).

and is trained for: large-scale armoured operations. Ukraine is essentially a large plain divided in half by the Dnieper River. Open plain terrain is very beneficial for agriculture and human activities in general but it is also very difficult to defend. The Russo-Ukrainian border is one of the longest borders in the world – around 2,000 kilometres – and cannot be manned properly by Kyiv. A strategy of forward defence would risk a catastrophic defeat for Ukraine. Since the Ukrainians cannot form a strong continuous front, Russian armoured and mechanised units would have an easy time outmanoeuvring and outflanking isolated units situated close to the border. The Russians can choose the time and place of their liking for massing their forces and attempting breakthroughs on one or several axes. They also benefit from air superiority. Following the traditional blitzkrieg recipe, armoured spearheads would try to breach Ukrainian lines to reach their rear, supported by indirect fire and tactical and strategic air operations. Airborne forces dropped behind Ukrainian lines can wreak havoc and help enveloping front units. Because of the weakness of their air defences, it would be very difficult for the Ukrainians to stop the Russians from dropping paratroopers on their rear. At the same time, important quantities of standoff weapons – conventionally armed cruise and ballistic missiles – would hit the main Ukrainian military-industrial centres. This difficulty of defending open plains is the geographic-strategic reason that pushed Russia for centuries and still pushes it today to expand westward on the North European Plain.

Ukraine has to guard five different fronts and two or three expected Russian axes of advance. The first and most important of these axes runs parallel to the M02 and H02 highways directly from the border to Kyiv. The Ukrainians would of course want to keep the Russians as far away from Kyiv as possible. The second one starts from Belgorod, goes through Kharkov and towards the Dnieper. The third one begins at Donetsk and is oriented westwards to reach Dnipro or link up with Crimea (Motin 2018, pp. 29–30). This last axis would witness a combined assault by Russian and Donbas separatist forces.⁵ Ukrainian troops will be needed to guard the border with Crimea, but this force could soon be assaulted and flanked by the Donbass thrust. Some forces will also be required to check the two motor rifle battalions the Russians maintain in Moldova (IISS 2020, p. 208). These forces are extremely limited and do not represent much of a threat, but will pin down some Ukrainian forces. Another potential front is Belarus. The Belarus-Ukraine border is also a long border where the Russians can choose the time and place of the engagement. It is a direct threat for Kyiv. Indeed, Kyiv is located close to it and marching towards Kyiv from Belarus avoids crossing the Dnieper. The southern coast too represents a source of worries. Russia has gained full sea dominance thanks to the modernisation of its Black Sea Fleet and to the annexation of Crimea. Some forces would have to stay in reserve for preventing potential amphibious landings. Nevertheless, the Ukrainians would not be able to block the Russians from using their fleet to support ground operations with air defence cover and cruise missiles. Therefore, Ukraine has the formidable task of providing for defence in almost every direction with limited forces against the military of a great power.

Ukraine would be more defensible if the status quo in Moldova but more importantly in Belarus changes. A Russian military build-up in southern Belarus would be a clear strategic warning that Ukraine is up for trouble. A worst-case scenario for Kyiv is indeed a joint Belarusian-Russian offensive. The deployment of only Belarusian forces near their own border, for example under the pretext of an exercise, would of course be a far less suspicious move for Moscow and help in keeping the element of surprise. Thus, Ukraine has a deep-seated interest for political change in Minsk and rapprochement between Belarus and the West. However, Russia will not let Belarus going away anytime soon. Moscow would react violently if Belarus seriously envisioned moving towards the other side of the fence.⁶ Although the Russian contingent in Transnistria is not a major threat in itself, it pins down a fraction of the Ukrainian army, which has to guard the border with Moldova. But as in the Belarusian case, there is no way Russia would leave Moldova willingly (Rogstad 2018). The geographic-strategic situation in Eastern Europe is therefore unlikely to evolve in a way more favourable to Ukrainian security.

The American consulting firm Stratfor (2015, slides 19–22), by conducting war-games, assesses the Russian army to be capable of seizing the Ukrainian territory east of the Dnieper within two weeks. However, crossing the river would be a harder task. After two weeks, it is also likely that a sizeable NATO force would be available to come to the rescue of Ukraine. Consequently, Ukraine's most workable solution is to maintain itself west of the Dnieper and block the Russians from crossing it. That nevertheless means that half of Ukraine would be lost before NATO can mount a significant relief force. An all-out Russian attack will incur without doubt high costs. An unprovoked move of this kind

⁵ These separatist entities are not to be taken lightly. Donetsk and Luhansk's militaries have arguably more firepower than the three Baltic states altogether (IISS 2020, pp. 214-215; see also Ferguson and Jenzen-Jones 2014).

⁶ The case of Belarus is discussed at more length in Bohdan (2014) and Piss (2018).

is not in sight for now. Yet if Ukraine was on the verge of joining NATO, it is hard to imagine that Moscow will sit back and watch from the side-lines.

Some observers have voiced their belief that the tensions around Ukraine can be resolved if Kyiv opts for neutrality. It is usually said that Russia would be satisfied with a non-aligned Ukraine free from foreign influences (e.g., Gady 2014). But a neutralisation of Ukraine is not a serious possibility. Neutrality works for countries such as Austria, Finland, or Switzerland, whose strategic importance is limited. These countries never represented a major stake in the East-West security competition. This is not true for Ukraine, which is crucially important to Moscow. It is a large and resource-rich country with a strong agriculture and industry. Brzezinski (1997, p. 47) famously explained that with Ukraine under its control, Russia is a European great power, with its reach stretching far into Central Europe. Without it, Russia becomes an Asian state cornered back into a defensive position at the margins of Europe. Neutrality for Ukraine means weakness for Russia. Moreover, that would be a fragile equilibrium, with Kyiv possibly going back to a westward orientation at will. Consequently, Moscow will go to great lengths to re-establish domination over Ukraine. The idea of a Chinese ‘third way’ for Ukraine or other post-Soviet countries is also illusory (Gerasymchuk and Poita 2018). China has no military power it can project to Eastern Europe and Eastern Europeans are fully aware that China and Russia are close partners (Brinza 2020; see also Scott 2018). In time of crisis, the Chinese would have no hesitation to choose the Russian side, a neighbouring and friendly great power, against some distant small states. It is basic diplomacy that the friend of my enemy cannot be my friend. Since the Russians consider that the defence perimeter of the Russian heartland starts at the Polish-Ukrainian border, there is little chance that the Kremlin would be satisfied with a neutral or non-aligned Ukraine. It would be per se an acknowledgement of strategic defeat.

6 The Paradox of the NATO-Russia Confrontation

The current NATO-Russia stalemate comes as quite a paradox. As shown earlier, the north-eastern flank of the Alliance, namely the Baltic states, is at the mercy of a Russian attack. A swift invasion would present NATO with a *fait accompli*. The Alliance would have to either back down and let Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania be occupied, or accept the challenge and counterattack. Yet pessimism is not justified for the Alliance as a whole. NATO is arguably the most powerful military force on the planet. Russia’s capabilities have been greatly diminished by the collapse of the Soviet Union and are only starting to recover since the late 2000s. It has no way to prevail in a Second World War-like continental war against the Allies. The Russians, because of their inferior industrial and demographic potential, have to win quickly if they are to win at all. This is the opposite of the situation that the West faced throughout the Cold War. Formidable forces were stationed to protect West Germany against a Warsaw Pact attack. The Eastern Block would have had a hard time to quickly defeat NATO (Mearsheimer 1982). But contrary to the current balance, the two opposite blocks could muster formidable resources and sustain a prolonged conventional war where the winner would be uncertain.

This paradox is explained easily. The West Europeans do not resent a Russian threat in the same manner they resented the Soviet threat of old. Consequently, they are not particularly in a hurry to commit large forces to the defence of Eastern Europe the same way Britain and France were committed to the defence of West Germany. On their side, the Americans have clearly stated that China was their main preoccupation and that Russia was only second (United States Department of Defense 2018). The United States, despite being the foremost world power, has little room to increase its commitment to Europe. U.S. military budget is already stretched thin. In the coming years, the United States will be hard pressed to refocus its armed forces towards Asia and against China (Schriver and Sayers 2020). A better division of roles between NATO member states based on military and geographic realities would magnify the West’s overall superiority and mitigate some of these issues (Mattelaer 2018). Nevertheless, this paradox of a strong NATO but a weak Eastern Flank is here to stay, except for some dramatic evolutions.

One such evolution could be a fundamental foreign policy realignment. Some have argued for an improvement in Russo-Western relations. It is said that Russia’s help is essential to deal with threats such as China, Iran, or Islamism (Editorial Board 2019; Rachman 2015). However, as discussed throughout this article, the ex-Soviet Eastern Europe is of tremendous importance to Russia. This can be illustrated by a simple geographic reasoning. The military-strategic border between the West and the Soviets during the Cold War can be described as a 950 kilometres long straight line running from Trieste in Italy to Lübeck in Germany. The former Soviet western border, if simplified as a straight line

running from Odessa in Ukraine to Kaliningrad, was around 1,200 kilometres long. The current Russian western border represents a line of 1,500 kilometres to defend. If Belarus' borders, which then form a salient to the former straight line, are included, the total rises up to 2,300 kilometres. If Kaliningrad, surrounded by NATO member states, is included too, Russia has to provide for defending still longer borders. Mearsheimer (1982, pp. 26–27) used in his study of the Cold War military balance the rule of thumb that a division is suited to defend around 25 kilometres of front. Every 100 kilometres of front consequently adds a requirement for four divisions. Moscow, which lacks the manpower of the former Soviet Union, has thus a vested interest in coming back to the shorter and more defensible former Soviet borders.⁷ NATO and Russia can hardly alter their hostile relations short of the West acknowledging a large Russian sphere of influence in Eastern Europe.

Another kind of possible dramatic evolution is embedded in the argument usually made that Russia is a dying great power because of demographic issues and sluggish economic growth. Barrack Obama famously dismissed it as a 'regional power' (Borger 2014). A cliché about Russia is that it has the same GDP as Spain. Although a thorough discussion of these arguments is beyond the scope of this paper, we can make a few observations. Russia's population was close to 148 million in 1990, 147 million in 2000, 143 million in 2020, and 144 million at the beginning of 2020 (147 million if Crimea is included). Germany, Japan, Ukraine, and probably soon China and South Korea, should be envious of this so-called collapse. Russia's demography is indeed stabilised. For *The military balance 2020* (IISS 2020, pp. 45, 103, 157, 194) Russian defence budget is ranked behind the ones of Britain and France and is deemed to be only a fraction of America's. Kofman and Connolly (2019; see also Tigner 2018) debunk this mainstream assessment of Russia's defence expenditures by using a purchase power parity measurement of Russian military spending. They estimate that the actual expenditures should then more likely range between \$150 billion and \$200 billion annually. The seemingly low level of Russian military spending is simply a result of the wide fluctuations of the rouble since 2014 and the events of Crimea. When the IISS' estimations of military expenditures are expressed using the 2013 rouble-dollar exchange rate (around thirty-three roubles for one dollar), it gives a spending effort comprised between \$97 billion and \$125 billion annually. So Russian military power is not going to vanish anytime soon (see also Petraitis 2015).

7 Conclusion

It is possible to divide this paper's cases into three groups. Norway is under the threat of losing some parts of its territory quickly (namely Finnmark). However, it is unlikely that the Norwegian state may end up extinguished, as Oslo and the southern heartland of Norway are out of reach of Russian forces. The Baltic states and Georgia are facing a far more existential threat, since they risk being totally occupied on very short notice. Ukraine is somewhere in between. A massive and sustained Russian onslaught could of course demolish the Ukrainian government. But such a war and the occupation following it would come at a tremendous cost for Moscow. It is so more likely that Russia would be content with seizing only parts of the country in the south and in the east.

The government of Georgia has expressed its willingness to improve the relations with Russia (Kakachia and Lebanidze 2019). In the light of the preceding discussion, international relations theory can help to explain this intent. According to Walt (2013, pp. 28–33), states tend to bandwagon with threats if they are too small to alter significantly the balance of power or if there is no alliance partner available or able to offer support. This fits well to the case of Georgia, which has neither a credible defence plan nor the possibility of allied reinforcement. Domestic politics pushes towards NATO while balance of power politics pushes towards accommodation with Russia. The above-described military weakness of the three Baltic states coupled with their NATO membership lead them into contradictory directions (Lamoreaux and Dyerly 2018, p. 20). They hope to see NATO coming up with a realistic defence posture; until it happens, they will have to appease Russia. Hedging between America and Russia is likely to be a transitory stage. If NATO corrects the force imbalance, then they will stay on its side of the fence. If the vulnerability persists or even worsens, they will end up on the Russian side of the fence. Ukraine has a strong industrial base and sizable assets that can be mobilised to create a formidable military force. However, for this to happen, the government has to be able to

⁷ It is noticeable that the south-western part of this border is made by the Carpathian Mountains. It is one of the few Eurasian terrain features that Moscow can use as a natural barrier for protecting its vast and open territory.

extract large resources from its society. If it fails to build up this kind of institutional strength, Kyiv will be forced to make concessions and appease Russia. Norway can live up with a threat over Finnmark and it has the economic means to create a more formidable military if it really wants so.

In any case, this paper has shown that more NATO expansion towards the East is unwise except for a large military build-up on the Alliance's Eastern borders. NATO is already hard pressed to assure the security of its present members, which is especially true for the three Baltic states and Norway. Alliance commitment without the military means to back it up is a recipe for disaster. NATO is essentially a military organisation without a military. The Allies will have to come up with a credible defence posture before envisioning further expansion eastward.

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